

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 15

EDITOR & PUBLISHER  
20 FEBRUARY 1982

# Reagan gets failing marks on government access

Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, flunked the Reagan Administration for its performance during 1981 on issues involving openness in government.

In a statement issued by its national officers, the 28,000-member group said that the administration "consistently took actions last year that would restrict the flow of information about the federal government to the people who pay for it."

When taken together, the Society said, these actions represent "a fundamental assault on First Amendment rights."

"In assembling its report card on President Reagan's first year in office, the White House wisely chose not to include his score on issues involving openness in government," the group continued. "It would have brought down his average considerably."

The Society issued a report card of its own giving Reagan failing grades on nine of 10 issues involving openness in government. Among the administration actions it criticized were:

—New Justice Department guidelines that encouraged federal agencies to be more restrictive in their release of information under the federal Freedom of Information Act.

—Administration proposals to amend the 15-year-old act, most of which would broaden the opportunities for federal agencies to withhold information from the public. Many of these proposals were incorporated in a bill approved last month by a Senate subcommittee.

—Administration-backed legislation that would provide harsh penalties for journalists and others who disclose the names of present or former CIA operatives, regardless of the source of that information or its value to the public. This measure already has been approved by the House and now awaits action on the Senate floor.

—A proposed executive order that would make it much easier for federal agencies to classify information—and thus withhold it from the public—and much harder for them to unclassify it.

"The president did not set a very positive example for his administration," the society noted. "In holding just six press

conferences last year, Mr. Reagan made himself available to the news media less frequently than any first-year president in at least a half century."

The only issue on which the Society gave Reagan a passing grade involved world press freedom. It praised his administration for "forcefully opposing efforts by UNESCO to regulate journalists around the world and impose government-

controls on the flow of news."

The Society—an umbrella organization with members from all segments of the journalism profession—called upon the president to reexamine the positions taken by his administration on issues involving public access to governmental information.

"During his 1980 campaign, Mr. Reagan promised to 'get government off the backs of the people,'" it said. "But people are hardly in a position to hold their government accountable if they are prevented from learning what it is doing."

## THE REAGAN REPORT CARD

### INTERNATIONAL PRESS FREEDOM

- P ○ The administration strongly has opposed an effort by UNESCO to regulate journalists around the world and to impose government controls on the flow of news.

### U.S. PRESS FREEDOM

- F ○ The administration has pushed for passage of a bill that, for the first time, would criminalize the publication of information from the public record. The bill, already approved by the House, would provide harsh penalties for journalists and others who disclosed the names of present and former CIA operatives, regardless of the source of that information or its value to the public.

### U.S. GOVERNMENT OPENNESS

- F ○ Last May, the Justice Department issued new guidelines that, in effect, encouraged all federal agencies to be more restrictive in their release of information under the 15-year-old Freedom of Information Act, which was designed to make federal agencies more open and accountable.
- F ○ Calling the Act "a highly overrated instrument," the administration unveiled proposals last October that would broaden the opportunities for many federal agencies to withhold information from the public. Many of the proposals were incorporated in a bill approved in December by the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution.
- F ○ By mid-year, the CIA had cut back on its public information office and on background briefings for journalists who write about foreign affairs.

- F ○ In September, the Justice Department revoked guidelines that limited the government's use of a vague, judicially-created power to penalize present and former employees who publish government information without obtaining clearance from the affected agency. Under a Supreme Court decision, such penalties can be levied even if no classified information is disclosed.

- F ○ For at least four months, the administration has been hard at work on a new executive order that would make it easier for government agencies to classify information (and thus withhold it from the public) and much harder for them to unclassify it.

### WHITE HOUSE OPENNESS

- F ○ President Reagan held just six press conferences during his first year in office, fewer than any first-year president in at least a half-century.
- F ○ Under the guise of national security, the White House has adopted new policies intended to stem the flow of news leaks. These leaks may have been politically inopportune, but none of them contained any information that was classified.
- F ○ The White House invoked executive privilege last October in refusing to release 31 Interior Department documents sought by a House oversight subcommittee. Executive privilege was invoked on the grounds that the documents "constitute material prepared for part of the Executive Branch in the deliberative process," a sweeping claim that could be applied to an unlimited range of government documents.